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ABSTRACT

This paper examines the overall effect of the 1976 presidential debates on the public's learning about issues and candidates, identifying several factors that are linked to campaign learning and that explain individual differences in the amount of learning that occurred from watching the debates. Findings presented in this paper are based on an intensive study of the experiences of 21 members of four panels (totaling 164 randomly selected, registered voters) that were observed for political learning throughout the 1976 campaign year. The paper concludes that the debates produced a measurable impact on audience members; those people who already knew much about the election issues and candidates learned more from the debates; of the demographic factors age, sex, and education, only level of education influenced political learning; debates, conventions, primaries, and similar highly publicized, dramatic occurrences are parts of a cumulative information process, and their effects on political learning cannot be studied in isolation; and the study is taken to demonstrate the utility of the small, intensive sample approach for pilot-testing major hypotheses about political learning. (RL)

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THE 1976 PRESIDENTIAL DEBATES AND PATTERNS OF POLITICAL LEARNING

by

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The 1976 Presidentical Debates and Patterns of Political Learning

Purpose of the Study

The 1976 presidential debates have been hailed as the major political communication events of the presidential race. Reportedly, an average of 85 million people watched each of the three debates which took up a total of four and a half hours of air time. Several media commentators claimed that the debates contributed heavily to political learning and voting decision-making among those members of the public who had not yet made a presidential choice.[1]

Along with the media and various pollsters, social scientists have followed the debates closely. They have analyzed the effects of the debates on the audience, focusing primarily on how the public evaluated the candidates' performances. They have also investigated whether viewing the debates produced attitudinal changes among viewers, and whether the attitudes resulting from perceptions of the debate had any impact on voting intentions. Researchers have suggested, for example, that the 1976 presidential debates have had a relatively minor impact on the candidate preference and party loyalty of voters.[2] It has also been suggested that the debates did little to change the salience of campaign issues.[3]

Although many other findings from debate studies are as yet unreported, one can already perceive a number of similarities between the findings from the Ford-Carter debates and those from the Kennedy-Nixon debates. Katz and Feldman, in summarizing various findings presented in a reader about the Kennedy-Nixon debates, concluded that the primary effect of the debates was to reinforce existing candidate preferences; there was no significant difference in attitudinal change among viewers and non-viewers.[4] These tentative conclusions are also supported by the study reported in this paper.

While these findings are important and of great interest to the public as well as the parties and candidates, a more fundamental effect of such a

significant political communication event -- its impact on political learning by the public-- has not received much attention from researchers. As was clearly stated by representatives of the League of Women Voters which arranged the debates, the major rationale for televised debates was to help the public to be better informed about the candidates and their stands on major issues so that the individual voters could make a sound voting decision. [5]

Evidence from previous studies demonstrates that public awareness of the candidates' views and the parties' stands on various issues increases as a result of campaigning. Ben-Zeev and White found that , as the 1960 campaign progressed, there was a decline in the percentage of people who said that they did not know where Kennedy stood on issues.[6] Trenaman and McQuail reported that, regardless of party preference, awareness of the parties' positions increased as a result of the campaign. They also found a slightly positive correlation (r= 0.11) between the number of political programs viewed on television and the increase in knowledge of the policies of the parties during the 1959 election in Britain.[7] Increased awareness of the candidates' views was also reported as a by-product of the Kennedy-Nixon debates.[8]

In this paper, the overall effect of the 1976 presidential debates on the public's learning about issues and candidates will be explored in the context of general campaign learning. Further, and more importantly, we have identified several factors which are linked to learning and which explain individual differences in the amount of learning from the debates. Obviously, learning is not a monolithic process. We need to know under what circumstances it is likely to occur and what factors produce differential learning. This study seeks to contribute to this important area of knowledge.

Hypotheses

In the natural communication environment, exposure to mass media messages is mostly voluntary and a matter of individual choice. This means that exposure to the first presidential debate on television was a matter of free choice for most members of the television audience. This was also true for continuation of exposure and reexposure to the same or subsequent debates and to the reports about the debates in other sources of information, such as newspapers, news magazines, or radio. If exposure and learning are matters of free choice, then the factors which led to this choice need to be examined. An obvious assumption is that attention is given initially and continuously to materials which are congruent with or satisfy predispositions.[9] Put in another way, those individuals who chose to expose themselves frequently to the television debates and/or to reports about the debates in other media, did so because they sought certain gratifications from these experiences.

Emphasis on the initiative of the audience brings into central focus the importance of considering the social-psychological attributes of individual audience members, if the effects of the debates in producing political learning are to be understood. Among many possible attributes of the audience that might be investigated in this regard, we have focused on two predispositional factors--one's interest in the presidential race, and one's knowledge or familiarity with the campaign issues and candidate qualifications and issue stands prior to the debates.

Interest in the 1976 election campaign in general, and in the presidential debates in particular, is considered to reflect a complex aggregation of motives that orient a person to exposing herself/himself to the debates and related reports. Further, the degree of interest and attentiveness to political information is probably due to personal and social factors which existed, for the most part,

prior to exposure to the debates. Since interest and exposure are apparently correlated, preexisting interest leads to exposure. Exposure, in turn, may sustain or strengthen preexisting interest. Since a correlational relationship is involved, care must be taken in asserting a direction of causality between the two.[10] However, in this study in which a clear time order is established between interest level before the debates and learning from the debates, we can examine the causal effect of interest on exposure to the debates and on the level of learning from the debates.

The second important aspect of individual predisposition that is considered to have causal influence on one's learning from the debates is one's knowledge and familiarity with the candidates and issues prior to the debates. It is generally accepted that individuals differ in their knowledge patterns and that, even within the same individual, patterns vary in complexity, depending on the nature of particular issues and their salience to the individual.[11] An individual's perceptual structure is determined by previous learning and allows the individual to process and retain information more effectively. Without any preexisting framework or knowledge regarding the candidates and issues, the debates and information regarding the debates would be extremely difficult to process. This would be particularly true for the more specific and detailed information about complex issues.

The above considerations enable us to predict that those who were more interested in and better informed about the candidates and issues and the related aspects of the 1976 campaign prior to the debates, were easier to reach and were able to learn more from the debates than those whose interest in the election and knowledge about candidates and issues was lower. While the overall information level could have increased for all members of the debate audience, the gap between the knowledge-rich and knowledge-poor was likely to remain stable, or to grow, rather than diminish in the wake of the debates.

We were able to examine these questions in depth because we had closely observed political learning by four small panels of voters totalling 164 individuals, over the period of an entire year. This encompassed all phases of the 1976 presidential campaign, from the pre-primary days in January 1976, through the primaries, the conventions, the post-convention phases, including the debates, to the election and the immediate post-election period.

Members of the four panels were selected from a randomly drawn sample of registered voters in Evanston (2 panels), a suburban community near Chicago, in metropolitan Indianapolis, Indiana, and in Lebanon, New Hampshire, a small New England town. The final sample was drawn to assure a balance of demographic characteristics to represent various levels of interest in politics, availability of time for news consumption, and attention to print and/or electronic media.

The findings of debate learning presented in this paper are based on the experiences of 21 members of our panels who were selected for especially intensive analysis. Since Evanston is primarily a university town, with little industry, the educational level runs higher than national averages. The descriptive data from the panel as a whole on the extent of interest/knowledge and learning from the debates should be interpreted in light of this fact. Testing of the main hypotheses and examination of relationships among variables, however, should not be seriously biased by the higher-than average educational level of our sample.

A comparison of responses given to debate-related questions by members of the intensive-study panel and by members of the other three panels showed no significant discrepancies in matters such as issue salience, attention to personal qualities of the candidates, or fluctuations in voting plans.[12] The same was true when we compared responses by our panel members with equivalent responses by Gallup and Roper poll interviewees throughout 1976.[13] This gives us confidence that our respondents do not differ significantly in their political learning behavior from general population samples. Intensive study of their political learning behaviors should reveal general patterns found commonly among voters with similar learning propensities.[14]

Table 1 presents the background Characteristics of the intensive study panel.

Table(1): Background Characteristics of the Intensive Study Panel *

1. High Interest--High Availability Group

Age	Sex	Education**	Occupation	Marital Status ***
25	M	College	Research Engineer	Single
38	M	College	Administrator	Married
45	M	College	Academic	Married
74	M	College	Lawyer	Married
75	M	Grade Sch.	Blue Collar	Married

2. High Interest--Low Availability Group

28	F	College	Home/Child Care	Married
28	F	College	Corporation Exec.	Single
30	F	College	Job/Home/Child Care	Married
33	M	College	Government Admin.	Married
36	M	College	Editor	Married

3. Low Interest--High Availability Group

25	M	College	Grocery Clerk	Single
46	F	High Sch.	Dress Shop Owner	Married
50	F	College	Homemaker	Widowed
65	F	High Sch.	Bookkeeper	Widowed
78	F	High Sch.	Homemaker	Widowed

4. Low Interest--Low Availability Group

23	M	High Sch.	Hospital Clerk	Single
27	M	College	Retail Sales	Single
28	F	High Sch.	Insurance Clerk	Single
36	F	High Sch.	Nurse	Married
56	F	3rd Grade	Maid	Widowed
62	M	College	Plant Manager	Married

*Group assignments are based on replies to nine questions which ascertained interest and participation in politics and media use patterns and life style characteristics. The latter two gave clues to the availability of mass media information for particular respondents. Scores were based on a combination of self-assessment and objective measures.

**The designations indicate completion of degree requirements.

*** Occupational needs, and social needs related to marital status, had a strong impact on frequencies of political discussion.

Members of the Evanston intensive study panel were personally interviewed ten times throughout the election year. The interviews, which ran between one and two-and-a-half hours in length, were tape-recorded. Most questions were open-ended and designed to permit the respondent to formulate the major outlines of the questions as she or he perceived them. These broad questions were then followed by more focussed questions designed to get commentary from all respondents in the same knowledge areas. To elicit as broad a response as possible, probes and follow-up questions were unlimited. Probes routinely asked for the reasons which had prompted particular answers.

The members of the intensive panel also completed daily diaries throughout the year in which they recorded news stories which had come to their attention from the mass media or through personal contacts. They were instructed to enter any news story which they remembered at the time set aside for diary completion, noting briefly the main theme, the source , the length of the story, the reasons for their interest in the story, and their reaction to it. A minimum of 30 minutes was to elapse between story exposure and diary entry to allow normal forgetting processes to operate. In most instances, the actual interval was four hours or more. In addition, members of the intensive panel were questioned during each interview about an array of twenty to thirty news stories which had been covered by the newspapers and/or television news programs to which they normally paid attention.

To detect possible sensitization effects which might result from the repeated interviews and diary-keeping, several checks were run using respondents who had not been included in the four panels. Recall of stories was scored on a four point scale, ranging from 1 for "none" to four for "a lot." The latter rating was awarded whenever respondents could spontaneously relate three or more major aspects of a news story. Comparisons of the mean recall scores showed no significant differences between the panel meambers ($\bar{x}$ = 2.3 points) and the control group ($\bar{x}$ = 2.4 points) based on responses about knowledge of randomly selected specific recent news stories. ($p < .05$).

The reason for the small sample, of course, is the desire to investigate

the political learning process intensively, over an extended period of time. The intensive nature of the investigation, which demanded close and prolonged monitoring of the information supply of specific respondents, collecting daily diaries, and researching life style details of panel members, made it mandatory to limit the number of respondents under study. The reward of this intensive effort is far more intimate knowledge of respondents than is ordinarily possible. This knowledge is essential in putting their verbal responses and their learning behaviors into appropriate contexts.

The key variables of the present study were assessed through the following multi-item scores:

INTEREST: The level of interest in the 1976 election , the candidates, and the issues throughout the pre-debate months was measured by the frequency of election stories in each respondent's diaries. We assumed that inclusion of stories in a respondent's diaries reflected their salience to the respondent at the time of writing. Hence, we believe that the frequency of election stories in the diaries provides an effective and reliable measure of a respondent's cumulative interest level prior to the debates.

KNOWLEDGE: The extent of knowledge and familiarity with the candidates and issues prior to the debates was scored by the extent of recall of election stories in response to questions in each of the interviews, starting in February, 1976. When the KNOWLEDGE scores were compared with the respondents' specific knowledge of candidate qualifications and campaign issues, as measured after the primaries, these two measures correlated with each other significantly. ($r=.65$; $p < .001$).

DEBATE LEARNING: In assessing the respondents' learning from the debates, either through television or through other sources, four questions were asked shortly after the second debate and again after the last. They were (1) "How much did you learn from the debates about Ford/Carter?" (2) "How much

did you learn from the debates about the candidates' issue stands?" (3) "What specific things about Ford/Carter did you learn from the debate?" and (4) "What specific knowledge did you gain in terms of each candidate's issue stands?" The first two items were asked to measure the respondent's self-assessment of her/his learning from each of the debates. The third and fourth items measured the actual knowledge of the respondent about candidate qualifications and issue stands that had been covered during the debates preceding the interview. The self-assessment measures and the objective test of learning correlated by $r=.68$ ($p < .001$) for issue learning and by $r=.62$ ($p < ,001$) for candidate learning.

TV EXPOSURE: The extent to which the respondents exposed themselves to each of the live telecasts of the presidential debates was measured by six levels --none(1), less than 30 minutes (2), 30-45 minutes (3), 45-60 minutes (4), 61-75 minutes (5) and more than 75 minutes (6), The sum of the scores for the three presidential debates was computed for each respondent's degree of exposure to the presidential debates on television.

PRIOR ATTITUDE: To check for a possible relationship between one's attitude towards the two candidates prior to the debates and the extent of exposure to the televised debates, as well as learning from the debates, we examined answers to a series of questions posed after the conventions. Respondents had been asked to use a seven-point scale to indicate various degrees of agreement or disagreement with the following four statements: (1) "Ford/Carter, as President , could be trusted." (2) Ford/Carter has the kind of personality a President ought to have." (3)"Ford/Carter, as President,would reduce unemployment." And (4) "Ford/Carter, as President, would make the government run better and make it more efficient." The respondent's composite score from these four items is used as a measure of her/his attitude toward Ford and Carter prior to the debates.

Findings

As mentioned earlier, the primary purpose of this study is to explore the overall effects of the 1976 presidential debates on political learning , and to investigate the factors that caused or contributed to the individual differences in learning from the debates. We have hypothesized two predispositional factors-- prior interest level , and the level of familiarity and knowledge regarding the candidates and issues which individuals had already acquired before the debates. We also investigated the relationships of a few demographic variables -- age, sex, education-- to the level of interest and knowledge and the patterns of learning from the debates.

The results from the study are reported below under three headings. These are (1) the respondents' overall reactions to the debates, including attendance patterns and learning reported from the debates; (2) the relationship between pre-debate interest and knowledge, and debate learning; and (3) the effects of age, sex, and education on learning from the debates.

The Respondents' Overall Reactions to the Debates

Among our 21 respondents, 6 did not watch any portion of the first debate. Seven respondents did not watch any of the second and the third presidential debates. Two respondents skipped all three debates. Only 2 respondents had a perfect debate attendance record for the presidential debates by watching all three in their entirety. Sixteen respondents watched the bulk of at least one debate; four of these watched two debates entirely. The primary reasons for skipping the televised encounters were conflicting duties and engagements at the time of the telecasts. Only two panel members cited lack of interest as the primary reason for missing the television performance. However,

the fact that other engagements were allowed to supersede the debates in so many instances casts some doubts on the strength of our respondents' commitment to attention to the debate event.

Most of our respondents expressed some degree of disappointment about the way the debates were handled. Primarily they complained about poor performance by the candidates, too much structure and lack of spontaneity in the debate format, or redundancy of questions raised during the debates with previously available information. Unfavorable reactions declined slightly for the second and third debate. While 17 out of 21 respondents had expressed disappointment about the first debate, only 10 and 7 respectively did so for the second and third debate. The reasons for less dissatisfaction may be better performance on all scores during the later debates or the audience may have become reconciled to the format of the debates and to the candidates' performances so that the gap between expectation and performance had closed down. The tape transcripts support the latter reason.

A corresponding pattern was found in the respondents' self-assessment of learning from the debates about key election issues and the candidates' positions on the issues. In the first debate, where expressed dissatisfaction had been high, none of the respondents reported learning anything new. In the second debate, however, complaints decreased and the number reporting no new issue learning was reduced to 9. In the third debate, the number reporting no new learning rose to 15, but remained below the first debate non-learning figure. As mentioned, the closing of the expectation-performance gap may explain the continued drop in complaints.

The total number of specific issues or candidate stands on issues which were mentioned by the respondents was 34 for all three debates, an average of 1.6 issues per respondent. Measured against even the most modest expectations , this is a poor learning rate. Our expectations are based on the assumption that an attentive

citizen, in a presentation geared to her/his interest and level of understanding, should be able to recall at least one out of every 100 issue mentions, especially when many issues were covered repeatedly. A total of 166 questions was asked in the three debates. Coding up to three issue mentions for each response, 297 issue mentions occurred, covering diverse aspects of 26 issues. Nearly half the issues were mentioned more than 10 times. Yet the 1% learning rate , which would have meant an average of 3.0 statements reflecting issue learning, was not achieved.

Learning from the debates about the personal qualities of the candidates was greater than issue learning. Approximately half of the respondents said that they learned something about Ford and Carter from each of the three debates. The total number of specific personal qualities of the two candidates which were elucidated by the three debates, as judged by our respondents, was almost double the number of specific issues and issue stands that they had learned. A total of 81 qualities were mentioned , for an average of 3.9 qualities learned by each respondent from the presidential debates. The personal qualities of the candidates which the respondents reported, related to their look of sincerity, tension, anxiety, the way they handled themselves in the debates, their articulateness and similar matters.

If one assumes that the answer to each of the 166 questions in the presidential debates provided an opportunity to evaluate the personal and professional qualifications of the candidates, then our respondents had 332 opportunities to judge the candidates along the dimensions which they had used in previous judgments. Based on these figures, the rate of learning about qualities stands at 1.5 percent. An extremely modest expecation of a 1% learning rate has been met. Any higher expectations or hopes , as expressed by people who view the democratic process optimistically, are disappointed.

We also examined the relationship between the total time spent on watching the television debates and learning. Did it really matter whether our respondents chose to watch all or part of the debates? Considering that the information about the debates was also available from other sources, such as radio, newspapers, and news magazines, it conceivably could be inconsequential whether the original television medium was used. We found that the relative length of television exposure and the overall learning about the candidates and issues were positively and significantly related. The correlation coefficient between television watching and issue learning was .60 ($p < .001$) when learning was judged from self-assessment and .41 ($p < .05$) when measured by specific issues mentioned by the respondents. The television exposure was also positively related to the respondents' learning about the candidates ($r = .53$, $p < .05$) when learning was measured by self-assessment, and $r = .45$ ($p < .05$) when measured by specific qualities reported. This shows clearly that the length of actual television watching significantly affected overall learning from the debates. Whatever public learning did occur from the debates -- and we have indicated that it was a discernible, yet modest amount-- came primarily from television.

Pre-Debate Interest/Knowledge and Debate Learning

The finding that the debate period was a time of increased learning is further supported by analysis of the trends in the interest level in the months prior to the debates. Figure 1 depicts the percentage of election-related stories out of the total number of news items which the respondents recorded in their diaries, plotted monthly. It demonstrates that the overall interest level corresponded closely with the major events in the campaign process. Overall attention to election stories increased throughout the primaries and dropped to the original level after the primaries. The attention level rose again during the Republican and Democratic conventions, only to plummet once more after the conventions.

As the presidential debates approached, the subdued interest of the public in the election revived and reached its highest peak of the election season. In the absence of comparative data from other years, we cannot assess how much of this rise must be attributed to the debate stimulus, and how much reflected the normal peaking of interest in the campaign when the election was near.

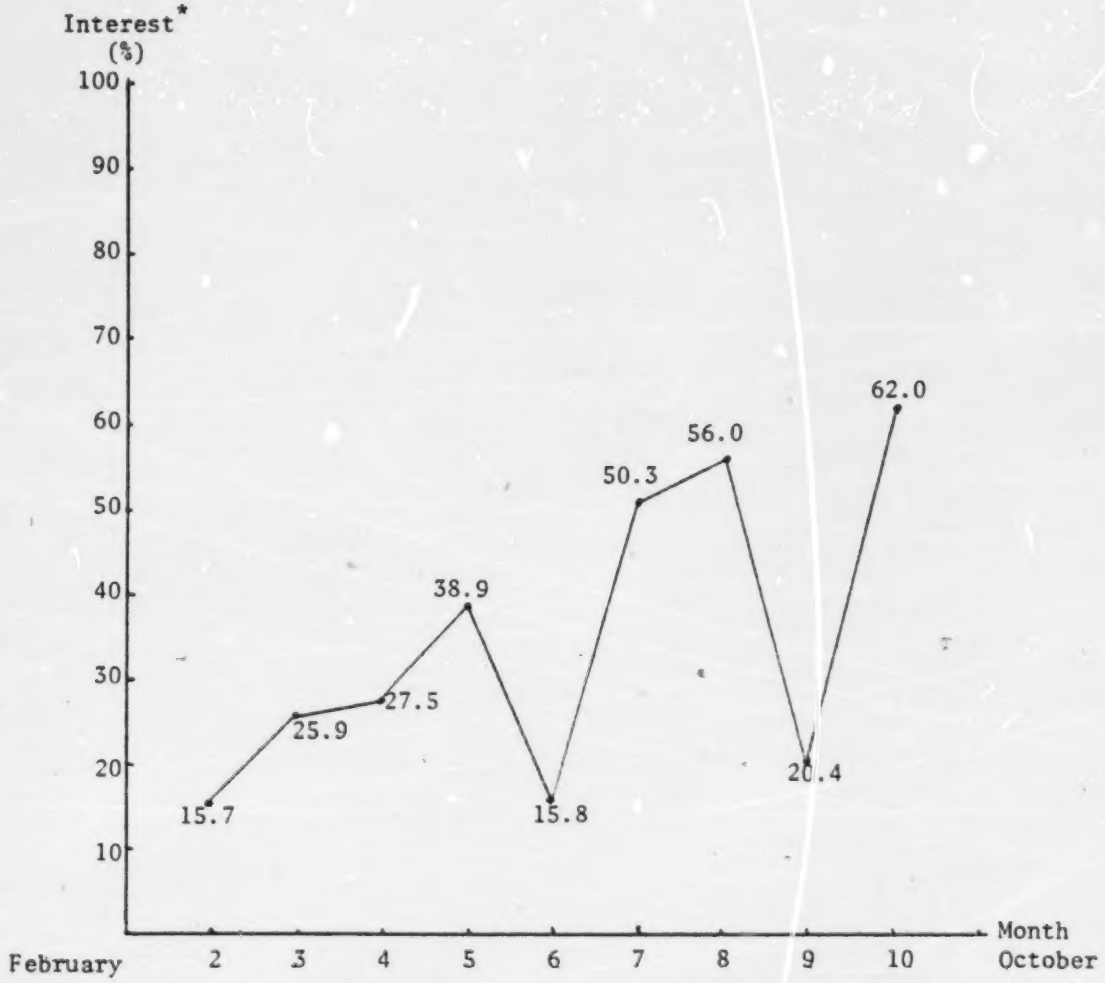
Insert Figure 1 about here

The respondents' knowledge and familiarity with the candidates and issues, as measured by the extent to which they recalled election-related news stories during interviews, followed the same patterns as observed in Figure 1. Recall of election stories during the debates increased considerably, as it had done during the primaries and the conventions.

Insert Figure 2 about here

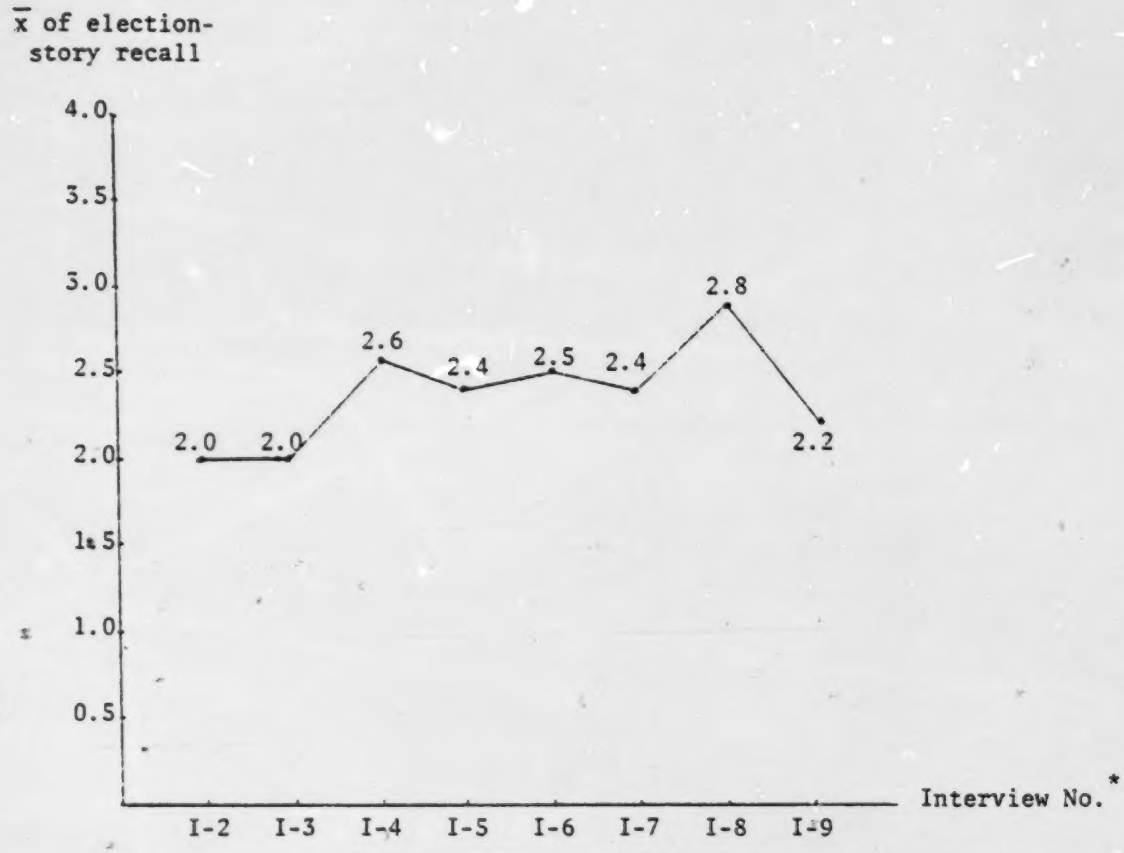
We also found that learning about issues and candidates was highly correlated. Those who learned most about issues from the debates, learned most about the candidates as well. The correlation coefficient between the two aspects of debate learning was .75 ($p < .001$) when both variables were measured by specific information learned, and .58 ($p < .001$) when measured by the respondents' subjective assessments. In a similar manner, the learning about the two candidates from the debates was closely related. Those who learned more about Ford as a person also learned more about Carter. ($r = .75$, $p < .001$). No selectivity was observed in either Ford or Carter supporters in their learning about the two candidates as well as in their television exposure and their learning about issues.

Insert Table 2 here



*The interest level represents the proportion of election-related stories recorded in the respondents' diaries during each month.

Figure (1): Trends in Interest in the Election, February through October 1976



*Interview 2 coincides with the Illinois primary; by Interview 3, eight primaries had been completed and 22 were yet to come; by Interview 4, the primary season was two-thirds completed with 11 primaries to come; by Interview 5, the primaries were over and the Democratic Convention was three weeks away. Interviews 6 and 7 span the Democratic and Republican conventions. Interview 8 coincides with the debates. Interview 9 followed the election.

(Figure (2): Knowledge of Election-Related News Stories During 1976

Table (2): Pearson Correlations between Evaluation of Candidates and Exposure/Learning from the Debates

	Evaluation of Ford	Evaluation of Carter
Degree of Exposure to TV Debates	-.01	-.16
Learning about Ford (Self-Assessment)	-.04	-.05
Learning about Ford (# of Qualities)	-.04	-.04
Learning about Carter (Self-Assessment)	-.52*	-.29
Learning about Carter (# of Qualities)	-.14	-.09
Learning about Issues (Self-Assessment)	-.09	-.07
Learning about Issues (# of Issues)	-.12	.21

*Significant at the .05 level. All other correlation coefficients are not statistically significant at the .10 level.

As reported in Table 2, favorable or unfavorable evaluation of the two candidates prior to the first debate did not correlate with the amount of exposure to the debates. Furthermore, no significant relationship was observed between the prior evaluation of Ford or Carter and learning about Ford/Carter after the debates. Learning about the candidates from the debates was thus not affected by the respondents' preexisting attitudes towards the candidates. One exception, however, is the negative relationship between prior attitude toward Ford and learning about Carter. Those who were more favorable toward Ford reported less learning about Carter from the debates. However, this self-assessment was not born out by our data on actual learning. We therefore conclude that actual learning was not influenced by the directionality of attitude toward the two candidates before the debates.

Given the overall patterns of learning from the debates and the developmental trends of public interest and knowledge through the pre-debate months, we then tested the data against our original hypotheses regarding the interrelationship between the two predispositional factors -- interest and knowledge-- with subsequent learning from the debates. Table 3 shows that the level of interest

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Insert Table 3 here
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in the election prior to the debates was positively associated with the extent to which the respondents watched the debates on television and with the various measures of learning about issues and candidates. A similar and even stronger correlation between prior knowledge and debate learning was found.

We can conclude from these results that learning from the presidential debates was influenced by the interest and

Table (3): Pearson Correlations between Prior Interest/Knowledge and Exposure/Learning from the Debates

	Prior Interest	Prior Knowledge
Degree of TV exposure	.35	.34
Learning about Issues (Self-Assessment)	.20	.35
Learning about Issues (# of Issues)	.21	.56**
Learning about Candidates (Self-Assessment)	.43*	.68***
Learning about Candidates (# of Qualities)	.37*	.67***

*Significant at the .10 level
**Significant at the .05 level
***Significant at the .001 level

knowledge that the respondents already possessed prior to the debates. The effect of the debates on the respondents' acquisition of knowledge were stronger among those who had already displayed a greater degree of interest and knowledge prior to the debates, than among those who had less interest and knowledge about the election. Information transmitted to the public through the televised debates reinforced preexisting interest and knowledge, rather than equalizing the differential level of knowledge among voters. The results clearly indicate that the process of knowledge acquisition is continuous and cumulative throughout the election year, rather than subject to sudden changes due to spectacular events such as the presidential debates.

The Effects of Age, Sex, and Education on Learning

Having established the relationship between prior interest and knowledge on one hand and learning from the debates on the other, we further attempted to explore possible relationships between some demographic and predispositional characteristics of the respondents and their learning from the debates. Table 4 reports the correlation coefficients between age, sex, education and prior interest and knowledge before the debates and the indicators of learning from the debates.

Insert Table 4 here

The table shows that the respondent's age and sex bear no significant relation to her/his pre-debate interest level and knowledge about the election. Except for a barely significant negative relationship between advanced age and learning about specific issues from the debates, there is no significant influence on other indicators of learning. Education, on the other hand, is significantly related to one's knowledge of election stories prior to the debates. Education also influences significantly the extent to which the respondents learned about the issues and candidates from the presidential debates. Education, although influencing one's knowledge and

Table (4): Pearson Correlations between Sex, Age, Education and Interest/Knowledge/Learning from the Debates

	Sex	Age	Education
Prior Interest	.04	.18	-.01
Prior Knowledge	-.21	-.07	.34*
Learning about Issues (Self-Assessment)	.01	.00	.31*
Learning about Issues (# of Issues)	.05	-.29*	.47**
Learning about Candidates (Self-Assessment)	.10	.02	.53***
Learning about Candidates (# of Qualities)	-.08	.03	.59***

*Significant at the .10 level
**Significant at the .05 level
***Significant at the .01 level

learning about issues and candidates before and after the debates, is not significantly related to one's interest level. As with sex and age, one cannot predict level of interest in the election and in the debates from the respondent's level of education.

Summary and Conclusions

The present paper has demonstrated a few empirical bases from which we can assess the impact of the 1976 presidential debates on political learning.

First, this study shows that the debates did produce a measurable impact on audience members. They stimulated most of our respondents to watch one or more of the televised encounters and expose themselves thereby to large doses of election information. They contributed to the sharp rise in level of interest in the election which occurred early in October. They also led to small increases in the audience's knowledge about candidates and issues. These effects occurred for all the respondents in our panel, regardless of their pre-debate attitudes towards the presidential candidates.

Although the knowledge gains were quite modest, they indicate that the audience was still receptive in the final weeks of the long campaign to learning more about the candidates as well as the issues. Whether learning would have been greater if the debates had occurred earlier in the campaign, or if the debate format had been different, remains a matter for conjecture on which the data presented here shed no light. Nonetheless, these kinds of questions ought to receive serious thought prior to repeating the 1976 experience in another presidential election.

Secondly, we found substantial differences in knowledge gain between those of high interest and knowledge and those of lesser interest and knowledge during the pre-debate period. Those who already knew much about the election learned more.

Again, these differences were unrelated to the respondents' prior attitudes toward the candidates. The findings about knowledge gains answer an intriguing question about learning incentives and their likely consequences. One might assume that the comparatively uninformed would have learned most from the debates because they realized that they needed additional information. For them, the debates might constitute a last chance to catch up on missed information, just in time for the election. Similarly, one might assume that the comparatively well-informed might learn little because they might ignore additional election information, believing that they had already learned much and hence were unlikely to discover many new things to learn during the debates. Contrary to such a possibility, the present study supported our initial hypothesis that the learning trends established prior to the debates continued throughout the debate period.

Thirdly, we have shown that of the three demographic factors which we examined -- age, sex, and education -- only the level of education influenced political learning. Respondents who had achieved higher educational levels displayed greater knowledge throughout the election year and learned more from the debates than those with less formal education. This differential capacity for learning, which has been demonstrated by other studies, indicates the need to reconsider the method of dispensing election information. Was the campaign, including the debates, conducted at an intellectual level which was beyond the comprehension of much of the electorate? Did it fail to stir the interests of the bulk of voters? If the answers are affirmative-- as they appear to be, judging from the responses of our panel -- then one needs to investigate what might have been done to change at least these deterrents

to learning.[16] It seems particularly important to find ways to assist the less well-educated and the less well-informed in understanding the candidates and the major election issues. A recent study may point the way. Its findings indicate that simple formats of news presentation, such as those which prevail in ordinary television newscasts, can serve as "knowledge levelers" between people of various educational levels.

The finding that age and sex did not make any difference in interest, learning, and knowledge levels runs counter to prevalent popular notions that there are age-linked differences in political learning at both ends of the age spectrum , and that political knowledge levels differ substantially among men and women. However, the finding is in accord with recent studies which indicate that sex and aging differences tend to disappear when one controls for education.[18] Since our study did not include young voters between the ages of 18 and 22, the lower interest and learning rates which one might have predicted for this group, did not come into play.

Fourthly, we have demonstrated that the effects of spectacular political events, such as the debates, on political learning , cannot be studied adequately if the occurrence is viewed in isolation. Debates, conventions, primaries, and similar highly publicized and dramatic occurrences are part of an information process which is cumulative throughout the year. They add to the previously disseminated fund of information about candidates and issues. The contribution which they can make depends on the richness or poverty of previously disseminated information.

Likewise, the political learning that occurred during the debates was part of a continuous process. How much and what type of information a given individual could learn depended very much on the nature of pre-debate learning. One could not measure the extent of knowledge gains from the debates without establishing

the level of pre-debate learning as the point of departure. Nor could one judge whether the debates were a major learning event, or just a small ripple in the sea of learning, without comparing debate learning with learning from other major events, such as the conventions or the primaries.

Lastly, a comment about the basic nature of our study seems in order. We have examined the relation of a variety of factors to political learning. Many of our findings require further testing with larger samples. However, since examination of these factors has involved intensive study of respondents over a prolonged time span, it could not have been accomplished if large samples had been used initially. Hence this study demonstrates the utility of the small, intensive sample approach for pilot-testing of major hypotheses concerning political learning.

Footnotes

1. The following sources were monitored for pre-and post-debate coverage: early evening network news on ABC, CBS, NBC; local news on CBS and NBC; press coverage in the New York Times, Philadelphia Inquirer, Boston Globe, Bangor Daily News, Chicago Tribune, Cleveland Plain Dealer, Detroit Free Press, Topeka Daily Capital, Houston Chronicle, Miami Herald, Raleigh News & Observer, Atlanta Constitution, Los Angeles Times, Seattle Daily Times, Denver Post, Salt Lake City Tribune, Chicago Daily Defender, National Observer, Wall Street Journal, and Washington Post. Two representative articles , illustrating the point made in the text, are a Chicago Tribune editorial and news story on September 25th by Jim Squires, titled "Debate prize: One third of voters still undecided;" and a New York Times story of October 7th by R.W. Apple, Jr., titled "Carter, focusing on Ford record, gains among independents in poll."

2. William R. Cantrall, Michael A. Colella, and Alan D. Monroe, "The Great Debates of 1976: A Quasi-Experimental Analysis of Audience Effects," Paper presented at the annual meeting of the Midwest Association for Public Opinion Research, 1976.

   Jack Dennis and Steven H. Chaffee, "Impact of the Debates Upon Partisan , Image and Issue Voting, in Great Debates, 1976, Ford vs. Carter, Sidney Kraus, ed., Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, forthcoming ; Paul R. Hagner and Leroy N. Rieselbach, "The Presidential Debates in the 1976 Campaign: A Panel Study," Midwest Political Science Association Paper, 1977.

3. Lee Becker, David Weaver, Doris Graber, and Maxwell McCombs, "Influence of the Debates on Public Agendas." In Great Debates, 1976, op. cit., forthcoming.

4. Elihu Katz and Jacob J. Feldman, "The Debates in the Light of Research: A Survey of Surveys in Sidney Kraus, ed., The Great Debates: Background, Perspective, Effects. Glouster, Mass: Peter Smith, 1968, pp. 173-223.

5. These purposes were stated in the moderators' remarks , preceding each debate. They can be found in debate texts, reprinted in the New York Times and other papers , quoting Edwin Newman for the first debate, Pauline Frederick for the second debate, and Barbara Walters for the third debate.

6. Saul Ben-Zeev and Irving R. White, "Effects and Implications," in Sidney Kraus, ed., The Great Debates: Background, Perspective, Effects. Glouster, Mass: Peter Smith, 1968, pp. 331-337.

7. Joseph Trenaman and Denis McQuail, "The Effects of Television and Other Media," in Joseph Trenaman and Denis McQuail, Television and the Political Image. London: Methuen, 1961, pp. 182-206.

8. Katz and Feldman, cited in note 4. Similar findings for 1976 are discussed by Arthur H. Miller and Michael MacKuen, "Who Saw What and Why: The 1976 Debates," American Association for Public Opinion Research Paper, 1977; and Lee B. Becker, Idowu A. Sobowale, Robin E. Cobbey, and Chaim H. Eyal, "Effects of the 1976 Debates on Voter's Understanding of the Candidates and Issues," Communications Research Center, Syracuse University, 1977.

9. Walter Weiss,"Effects of the Mass Media of Communication," in Gardner Lindzey and Elliot Aronson, eds., The Handbook of Social Psychology, 2nd ed., Vol. V, Reading, Mass: Addison-Wesley Publishing Co., 1969, pp. 77-195.

10. Ibid, p. 155.

11. W. Crockett, "Cognitive Complexity and Impression Formation," in B.A. Maher, ed., Progress in Experimental Personality Research. New York: Academic Press, 1965, Vol. 1, p. 53.

12. See for instance the data cited in Becker, Weaver, Graber, and McCombs, cited in note 3, above. Besides the authors of this paper, major collaborators in this study were Maxwell McCombs and Lee Becker and associates, Syracuse University, and David Weaver and associates, Indiana University.

13. See, for example, the candidate preference polls and "Most Important Problem " polls in the Gallup Opinion Index starting with No. 126 in January, 1976 and extending throughout the calendar year. Also see the Roper polls on election knowledge published in the New York Times, as well as the CBS-Times polls. Examples are polls published on June 3rd and 4th under the heading "Poll Finds Voters Unsure about Candidates' Positions" and "Poll Finds Public Hazy on Candidates." For most polls, there was no significant difference between the distribution of responses of our panel members and those of poll respondents.

14. The argument that generalizable findings about human behavior can be made on the basis of intensive study of small numbers of individuals has been made persuasively by many scholars. Examples are Steven R. Brown, "Intensive Analysis in Political Research," Political Methodology, Vol. 1, 1974, pp. 1-25; Fred M. Kerlinger, "Q-Methodology in Behavioral Research," in Steven R. Brown and Garry D. Brenner, eds., Science, Psychology, Communication. New York: Teacher's College Press, 1972, pp. 3-38; Kenneth Keniston, Young Radicals. New York: Harcourt, Brace and World, 1968, passim; Robert E. Lane, Political Ideology: Why the American Common Man Believes What He Does. New York: The Free Press, 1962, pp. 1-11; and Karl Lamb, As Orange Goes: Twelve California Families and the Future of American Politics. New York: W.W. Norton, 1975, pp. vii-xiii, 3-23.

15. Philip J. Tichenor, George Donohue, and Clarice Olien, "Mass Media and Differential Growth in Knowledge," Public Opinion Quarterly, Vol. 34, 1970, pp. 151-170. Also see Serena Wade and Wilbur Schramm, "The Mass Media as Sources of Public Affairs, Science, and Health Knowledge," Public Opinion Quarterly, Vol. 33, 1969, pp. 197-209.

16. No claims are made that these are the sole factors which explain small learning gains. In fact, the low salience of politics in comparison with other concerns, demonstrated in our data on debate watching, may make the effects of changes in timing and format negligible.Nonetheless, such changes deserve attention.

17. W. Russell Neuman, "Patterns of Recall among Television News Viewers," Public Opinion Quarterly, Vol. 40, 1976, pp. 115-123.

18. A variety of relevant findings are reported in Gerald Pomper, Voters' Choice: Varieties of American Electoral Behavior. New York: Dodd, Mead & Co., 1975, pp. 67-116.